

## **Executive Summary**

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Rural Pulse™ is a research study that has been commissioned by the Blandin Foundation since 1998 to gain a real-time snapshot of the concerns, perceptions and priorities of rural Minnesota residents. This initiative was last conducted in 2010 and served to identify trends within significant, complex subject areas such as the economy, education, employment and quality of life. Past studies have also included canvassing opinions within the Foundation’s “home” geographical area as well as among Blandin Community Leadership and Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program alumni.

The Foundation chose to undertake this effort again in 2013 to accomplish the following objectives:

- Understand the issues rural residents and leaders prioritize within their communities;
- Learn if community needs are being adequately addressed;
- Compare and contrast issue movement in comparison to past Rural Pulse studies; and, new for 2013,
- Gain an understanding of how the opinions of urban Minnesotans and those of ethnic and cultural differences compare to at-large findings.

The Blandin Foundation also is providing an urban dimension to this year’s study, made possible through support from the Minnesota Community Foundation.

## **Methodology**

Independent research and communications consultant Russell Herder was retained to conduct this study. The survey instrument for Rural Pulse™ 2013 was developed in cooperation with Blandin Foundation leadership. Where possible and relevant, certain questions from past studies were repeated for comparison purposes. Components of this year’s effort included the following:

- Telephone interviews conducted between March 7 and 15 among rural Minnesotans residing in communities with a population of 35,000 or fewer, excluding the seven-county Twin Cities metro area;
- E-mail survey to alumni of the Blandin Community Leadership and the Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program between March 29 and April 8;
- Telephone interviews completed between March 16 and 28 within the Blandin Foundation’s home area – defined as Grand Rapids and Itasca County, including the communities of Blackduck, Hill City, Northome and Remer;

- Telephone interviews conducted between March 19 and April 1 with Minnesota residents within the seven-county metro area, as well as cities with a population of more than 35,000.
- Interviews conducted March 23-April 30 with cultural groups within rural Minnesota, inclusive of African-American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino and immigrants (e.g., Hmong, Somali, Southeast Asian), and multi-cultural individuals.

### **Key Findings**

#### **Optimism Continues: Rural Minnesotans feel their community is vibrant and believe in their ability to make a positive impact.**

Three in four rural Minnesotans believe their community is a vibrant place to live and work. An even greater percentage believe their community is strong, resilient and able to recover from difficult situations.

Three in four rural Minnesotans say they feel a sense of ownership over the direction of their community and are able to make a contribution to its future.

Eighty-five percent of rural Minnesotans feel that people like themselves are able to make an impact and improve local quality of life.

Nearly seven in 10 rural Minnesotans feel quality of life will improve over the next five years, though urban Minnesotans (83%) have a much more positive outlook for improved quality of life.

**Collaboration: Rural Minnesotans have some concerns, however, about their community’s ability to work together effectively.**

One in five rural and urban residents do not feel their community works together cohesively.

Three in four rural Minnesotans believe their community is able to work across differences.

*Rural Minnesotans with lower incomes lack confidence in their ability to affect change and their community as a whole.*  
Rural residents with lower incomes are the least likely to believe their community is a vibrant place to live and work and that their community is strong, resilient and able to recover from difficult situations. They are also the least likely to feel people like themselves are able to make an impact and improve local quality of life, and they are less likely to feel their community works together cohesively and is able to work across differences.

*Younger residents show higher confidence in their community and personal ability to contribute.*  
Younger residents are the most likely to believe their community is vibrant and strong, and they are most likely to feel a sense of ownership and able to make a personal contribution to the improvement of quality of life. They are also more likely to believe their community is able to work across differences.

**Rural Voice: Many Minnesotans do not believe they are being heard.**

When asked if the needs and well-being of rural Minnesota communities are as important to legislators and policymakers as those of metropolitan cities, a third (34%) of rural Minnesotans and 26 percent of urban residents are of the opinion that they are not.

Ninety-two percent of rural Minnesotans say it is important to support political candidates who actively address rural issues.

When asked where they learn about local issues, rural Minnesotans say that they rely heavily on family, friends and neighbors to keep them updated about their local area. Other top information sources include the news media, information received from local schools and the Internet.

**Quality of Life: Rural Minnesotans believe their community is addressing most local needs.**

Most rural residents (87%) believe that their community offers equal access to essential services.

Rural residents give their community relatively good grades for addressing environmental stewardship, crime control, services for the elderly, education, improving access to technology and residential housing.

Transportation is a concern for nearly one in three (31%) rural Minnesotans, while adequate healthcare is seen as an issue for one in four.

Availability of adequate cultural and arts opportunities is a concern for 36 percent of rural Minnesota residents, with only three in five (59%) feeling local needs are being met.

Rural and urban residents give the lowest community ratings to attracting new businesses that provide ample living-wage jobs.

When asked who they feel is responsible for ensuring that adequate, quality educational opportunities are available in their community, parents and the government are seen as the most responsible parties by rural and urban residents alike. About one in four feel local residents without school-age children should also play a role in assisting with this effort, while about one in five feel business owners carry responsibility.

**The Economic Lens: Concern about jobs continues.**

While 22 percent of rural residents feel their local economy has improved over the last year, more than half believe it has stayed the same and 20 percent indicate that it has worsened. Urban Minnesota residents are nearly *twice as likely* to feel their local economy has seen improvement over the past year.

The need for attracting new, high-quality jobs continues to be the top priority for 36 percent of rural Minnesotans – more than *twice* as important as education. Urban dwellers also consider attracting new, high-quality jobs (28%) and educational opportunities (21%) to be top priorities.

Nearly three in five rural residents and 41 percent of their urban neighbors feel that there are inadequate living-wage job opportunities in their community.

Along with concern over insufficient employment options, more than half of rural Minnesotans and a third of urban area residents believe that their community does not do enough to attract new businesses.

Nearly one in three rural Minnesotans feel their community lacks the ability to maintain and grow *existing* businesses.

Most rural and urban residents believe improved technology could assist with job retention and creation, and feel their local area works together to maintain and grow job opportunities.

Three in four Minnesota residents say they are aware of available resources to assist in finding employment. However, only half of rural Minnesotans and two-thirds in urban areas feel there are enough local resources to help entrepreneurs start new businesses.

While a third of rural Minnesotans say that their income has increased over the past year, many households are still struggling with a decrease in wages (21%).

*Across the board, rural residents with lower incomes appear to be hardest hit by the economy.*

Rural residents with lower incomes are even more likely than other Minnesotans to feel their local economy has declined over the past year, are the most likely to feel there are not adequate living-wage job opportunities in their community, and believe their community lacks the ability to maintain and grow existing businesses.

Rural residents with lower incomes are the most likely to say they have considered leaving their community for a larger city/metro area and do not expect to be living in their current area five years from now.

**Migration: Relocation within Minnesota continues, but the drivers vary.**

Fifteen percent of rural Minnesotans and 17 percent of their urban neighbors have considered leaving their community for a different locale within the past two years.

Of those who have considered a move, about half of rural residents say it would be to pursue job opportunities, while a desire for greater quality of life is the main factor for urban residents contemplating such a move.

Looking forward, 13 percent of rural Minnesotans and one in five urban area residents say they do not expect to be living in their current area five years from now.

**A Changing Landscape: Minnesota continues to diversify, but leadership roles are not always inclusive.**

About half of rural residents and two-thirds of those in urban areas say their community's ethnic or racial makeup has become more diverse over the past five years.

Despite this changing landscape, 18 percent of rural residents and 11 percent in urban areas *do not* feel their community is welcoming to people of varying backgrounds and perspectives.

While more than half of rural residents and three in four in urban areas feel local community leadership is comprised of people from different backgrounds, many (37% rural, 21% urban) feel that this is *not* the case.

Nearly half of rural and urban Minnesotans have not served in a community leadership role, largely due to lack of time or because they have not been invited to do so. About half, however, indicate that they would at least consider serving in a community leadership role if invited to do so.

*Lower-income rural residents see even less inclusivity in leadership.*

Rural residents with lower incomes are the least likely to feel local leadership is inclusive of people from different backgrounds and perspectives, and they are the least likely to say they have served in a leadership role within their community.